

Haunted Houses

Cromwell Childs

Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly
Vol. XL, No. 2, Aug. 1895.

Britton House (Amboy Rd)



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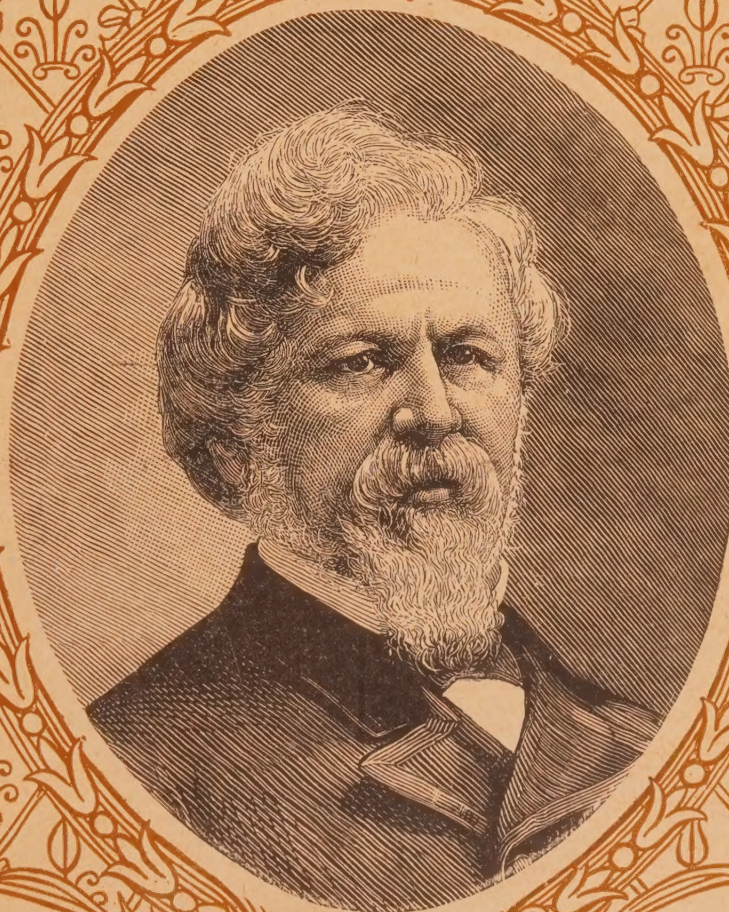
VOL. XL.—No. 2

AUGUST
1895

PRICE 25 CENTS

FRANK LESLIE'S POPULAR MONTHLY

ILLUSTRATED



FRANK LESLIE'S
PUBLISHING HOUSE



42-44 BOND ST.
NEW YORK.

CLARK BOGERT

FRANK LESLIE'S POPULAR MONTHLY

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AUGUST, 1895.

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Established by Frank Leslie in 1855.

FRANK LESLIE'S PUBLISHING HOUSE,
42-44 Bond Street, New York.

Copyright, 1895, by FREDERIC L. COLVER.—Entered at the New York Post Office, N. Y., as Second-class Matter.

by New York photographers. It is quite the fashion at Long Branch to be tintyped.

There seems to be a certain reckless, cynical defiance about the tintype at a summer resort on the seashore that will photograph people under conditions and in costumes that one never sees in the ordinary photograph. I suppose very few girls are without a tintype of themselves in bathing costume, surrounded by their mutual friends, male and female.

At Asbury Park the missionary, the unwashed evangelist, the worn-out country parson and the pretty parish visitors, Sunday-school teachers and Salvation Army maidens cast off the garb of sober destiny and frolic in the waves as other ordinary and less sacred people do. It is a pretty sight for the moralist, this jumble of psalm-singers and earnest workers for the church, all shouting and screaming and tumbling and jumping about like young frogs in a wind-swept pond.

In Atlantic City the staid Philadelphian and the Southern beauty exchange ancestral confidences half under water. Viewing these idyls of the sea from a broad-gauge view, embracing the Venetians, the Hollanders, the savage figures of the tropics and the stiff clam-pride of the English, I think the American summer girl presents a greater form of characteristic variety on the seashore than all the rest. Her costumes are chosen from sources all over the world, and there is an individuality about the choice which is very much to the general advantage of her natural gifts of form.

There is quite a field for the realistic painter who, true to the lines of nature, will avoid the impressionist school and group the Newport, the Narragansett, the Bar Harbor and Atlantic City girls about a central figure—a *fin de siècle* form of salt-water nymph—the Long Branch summer girl in her bathing costume.



HAUNTED HOUSES.

BY CROMWELL CHILDE.

GHOSTS do not walk o' nights in this day and generation in New York and its vicinity, if popular belief is to be taken into account. And yet, if the reports of the correspondents of the Society for Psychical Research may be credited, there have been many apparitions seen and many strange noises heard. Not the noises and appearances that may be at once run to earth, but authenticated records of historic buildings haunted for long years past by spirits that wore the garb of flesh in Revolutionary times, and whose wanderings succeeding tenants have noticed as the years have gone by.

New York, and the region encircling it, is especially rich in haunted houses and localities of this type. *Was* would be a better word than *is*, for, as the old men and women who belonged to former days have passed away, much of this ghostly legendary lore has gone with them, never

to be heard again. Something, nevertheless, has been handed down, though the sons and daughters who tell the legends tell them critically and without the abiding faith in their truth that their elders used to have.

Staten Island and Kings County have the chief and the most romantic of these legends, now that the craze of demolition of the old has succeeded in building up almost a brand new New York within the last two decades. The suburbanite invader has touched Staten Island comparatively lightly as yet, and Brooklyn has not crept far enough over Kings County to completely obliterate all its traditionary sites.

It is a pity that John H. Austen is not alive today to tell the tradition of the Austen mansion with his own lips. Only half a believer in the periodic return of its historic ghost, he was yet proud of the home he had acquired by right



THE BERGEN HOMESTEAD, BROOKLYN.

of purchase before the fifties, and the spectre that never hove in sight and yet, people said, could be heard at the dead of night seemed, in some way, to go with the title. The Austen mansion is a famous old type of the original American house. Few pre-Revolutionary homes have been preserved with such care. The sturdy beams of white oak, the rafters of cedar and the shingles of cypress wood that were used in its construction in 1710, one and all, still remain in place, and the house, even to its living rooms on the lower floor, has not been altered a jot or a tittle.

It stands at the foot of Pennsylvania Avenue, Clifton, Staten Island, on a gently sloping hillside just north of the Quarantine Station. A fine lawn runs down almost to the water's edge, and is bordered by lilac bushes in full bloom. Just at the point of the Narrows it commands a superb, unobstructed view of both bays. Peaked and fretted dormer windows rise out of the roof that falls in front to the posts of the low piazza, raised a single step from the ground. These piazza posts are entwined with running vines, and trees that are bi-centenarians arch above.

It is just the house to have a spectre attached to it. Its foundation walls are three feet thick, and the knocker of the entrance door is fantastically cast in the guise of an evil griffin's head (it came from an ancient castle in Rouen). Below stairs is a gloomy cellar with a massive fireplace, and it is known that slaves were kept here in the "days of '76." One tradition of the neighborhood tells that the clanking of slaves' chains is still heard after midnight, and that the spirits of the wretched Africans still linger. But this is a

wayside tradition, and not the story of the Austen house.

The old parlor, entered by a door at the right, is low of ceiling, and, save for the modern piano, it has yet the Revolutionary spell upon it. The ancient beams, through their gloss and varnish, still show the veins of the wood and the marks of the colonial axe that hewed them. In each corner is a colonial cabinet, built to the wall and ornamented with old gilt and oddly shaped pieces of looking-glass. A mirror or two has the same quaint designing in its gilt frames. Even the furniture is antique, and bears the trace of years.

The haunted chamber is here. During a portion of the war for independence the British were stationed on Staten Island, and a red coat, a trooper of King George, loved a maiden who lived in this very mansion. Whether she was Whig or Tory tradition does not say; nor is it possible to find out, as the house was in turn the abode of both loyalists and patriots. Nor has her name been handed down, nor the name of the dapper young cavalier who loved her. It is safe to say that she was for the colonies, for she haughtily refused the trooper of the king. Driven to despair, he made his way into the parlor one dark night and hanged himself to one of these massive beams. Even to-day, it is said, the tread of military boots and the clinking of spurs can be heard in the lower hall, and there are even some who avow that the spurs jingle after midnight in the lonely room, as they did when the cavalier swung to and fro in death over one hundred years ago.

This ghost is the ghost of an humble British

soldier—a captain at most—but weightier spirits are not lacking. The footsteps of even so great a character in history as Lord Howe are reported to have been heard, and there is trustworthy testimony to the effect that late one night six years ago the spectre of the famous general stalked through the hall of the Bergen homestead—the “Mansion House”—in full regimentals and regalia. He was returning to the scenes of his greatest military triumph in America, for the Bergen homestead was the British headquarters during the battle of Long Island, and from there Howe sent out his orderlies and watched the conflict.

It is a curious coincidence, by the way, and a fact, that Tunis G. Bergen, of Brooklyn, the present representative of the family, recalls with much ancestral pride that the American headquarters were also on the old Bergen farm, on an elevation two or three miles away, and about the site of the present Carroll Park in South Brooklyn. There Washington stood, and saw his troops forced back and Long Island lost to the blue and buff.

The Bergen homestead itself is now no more, the march of improvements along Third Avenue, South Brooklyn (it stood between Thirty-second and Thirty-fifth streets and directly on the bay), having necessitated its destruction recently. But the traditions of Lord Howe's ghost continue

fresh and undimmed, even though a row of modern apartments and stores stand where the old homestead once did.

They say that the ghost still comes on occasional midnights, the anniversary of the old battle of Long Island; but these may be merely idle tales of gossiping women. Howe's spectre was heard, however, some six years ago, and three veracious women tell the story.

Some idea of the Bergen homestead it is well to have at first. It was one of the chief landmarks of Kings County, built in 1564 by the original Tunis Bergen, one of the earliest Dutchmen that settled on Long Island. He was a noted slaveholder, and the remains of the negro quarters were until recently visible. So well did the Bergens guard their property, and so profitable did their acres become, that the homestead never passed out of their hands. Its structure was the perfect colonial farmhouse type. A broad piazza held up by rounded pillars ran across the mansion's front, and on each side was a two-story wing. In that to the south the present Bergen had his library—a most remarkable collection of books—until the old house was pulled down. The roof was of the gambrel variety, with a window in a peak directly over the entrance door.

The hall on each floor was wide and ran straight through the house. Entrance and egress at the



THE BRITTON HOUSE, STATEN ISLAND.

back on the lower story was had through a quaint old double Dutch door.

From the dusty garret, the Bergen tradition ran, Howe's ghost was wont to come. It would descend the two flights of stairs with measured steps, pace through the lower hall, draw the bolts of the back door, and vanish in silence. One night Miss Bergen, a sister of the present Tunis G., had two women friends visiting her. They had never heard the story of the ghost of Howe, and she did not enlighten them. Indeed, nothing was further from her thoughts at the time than the military spirit that haunted her home. An hour before midnight the three ladies made all below stairs secure and said good-night at the entrance of their bedroom doors.

The fall of martial footsteps down the attic stairs awakened Miss Bergen, at just what hour she could never afterward say. There was no room for the deception of the senses. The footsteps were marvelously clear; they were the footsteps of a heavy man. With them came the rattling of spurs and the clanking of a sword, as the scabbard dropped from step to step.

"The ghost of Howe!" That immediately flashed across her mind. But she did not dare to open her door. Lying in her bed, she heard the steps pass through the hall, down the lower flight and cross the hall there, shooting the bolts of the Dutch door. It was opened, then closed, and then an awful stillness came. Trembling, she rushed into the hallway. A lighted lamp and two white-robed figures stood shivering at the door of the chamber opposite.

"What was that?" they cried—"that tramping down the stairs, and the clinking?" In detail they described the sounds exactly as Miss Bergen had heard them. "That—that," she faltered, "was the ghost of General Howe?"

Another locality has memories of Lord Howe and his American campaign—though it is not his lordship's ghost that haunts this dwelling—the house and grounds of Billop, on the outskirts of Tottenville, Staten Island. At nightfall the outlook is wild and eerie, for the mansion, deserted by all save two caretakers, fronts on the wide bay into which the Shrewsbury River opens. Gigantic willows, over two centuries old, flank the path leading down to the shore. No human habitation is in sight, and the stately dwelling, while yet in good repair, is slowly and steadily decaying.

Hither came Christopher Billop in 1670 or thereabouts, and built, timber by timber, this mansion of square and severely simple architecture, relieved only by its wide and extensive portico, two stories high. Here, one hundred years later, was made history, for the commissioners of

the famous Peace Conference (which proved a failure) met in this mansion. While the British occupied Staten Island, Lord Howe lodged here and used the cellar for the keeping of prisoners. Either he or some other English officer went further in their cruelty and severity, and constructed a well-masoned brick tunnel, built so as not to admit a ray of light, for the better keeping of the captive colonials. The sufferings of these unhappy men must have been beyond description, for it is recorded that the tunnel was kept "full to the brim," and many American soldiers are known to have died there.

This under chamber is called a "tunnel" by the villagers, and yet the name gives a false impression, for the chamber leads nowhere. It is simply a cylindrical brick cell some thirty feet long and barely six feet high. To-day it is in as good repair as ever, but its communication with the cellar is now by a flimsy wooden door. Even in broad daylight it is impossible to see in its depths without a tallow candle.

Out on the broad lawn and through the cellar the spirits of the American soldiers who died there wander. The inhabitants roundabout declare it haunted, and many an old man in the chimney corner shakes his head as he speaks of the Billop house.

An Indian tragedy is the story of a heap of fast crumbling ruins, uninhabitable now, on the Amboy Road, a few miles north of the Billop plantation. The surrounding country knows these ruins as the "Old Britton House." Built by a Huguenot refugee in 1680, the old Dutch farmhouse rose to the dignity of a courthouse, and during the Revolution a Hessian commander inhabited it. Many years have gone by since it enjoyed such high estate, having fallen from bad to worse, its last tenants being a family of impoverished negroes. The old dwelling became too miserable even for them finally. Little but a heap of crumbled stones now remain to tell the story, but the legend is there, and the country people fear to pass the house by night. They relate how the yells of the savages are still heard and the cries of the English family that was murdered there in cold blood. Spectres are said to tread back and forth from out the ruins, and with the moonlight shining fitfully through the trees it is indeed a grewsome place at the midnight hour.

Of strictly New York City ghosts but three veracious traditions have come down through the years. The woods of the Bronx River have a pathetic romance in their annals of a Whig maiden of West Chester whose course of true love ran very roughly. She loved a Tory gentle-

man of position and wealth, and he loved her. But the struggle of the colonies was at its height just then, and the maid's patriot father would not listen to the lovers. Like a dutiful girl she gave up all thoughts of the marriage, and, slipping away into the woods one morning, hanged herself to a tree.

Her ghost wanders yet near the ruins of the Lorillard snuff mills, and the tradition is that late on autumn evenings glimpses of a fitting white gown are to be had, and the wraith of the colonial maid, to whom love was all, moans because she and her lover are yet far apart.

The Walton house spectre of Cherry Hill has been laid these many years, and the Fourth Ward, amid its political revelries, its dances and its picnics, has no time to think of it. Yet it may come again in the same evil guise of a rough and dreadful seafaring man, just as it appeared to Captain Guilford Walton in the latter days of the past century. Dogging the captain's footsteps when least expected, driving him into a state of nervous prostration and abnormal terror, and coming finally to his deathbed a few months later to claim its own, this spectre was the spirit of a sailor whom the captain had killed aboard the ship years before. A man of blood in his early days, Captain Walton had at last settled down in New York, and was lodging in his ancestral home on Franklin Square, opposite to where the building of the Harpers now stands. He held a high social position in the then little metropolis, and was received by such old families as the Hamiltons, the Crugers and the Gracies.

There are coincidences in spiritland as well as elsewhere, and it is worth noting that the Walton ghost first appeared to the captain in Kirtle Grove, a portion of what is now Spring Street, only a few rods away from the place of the Manhattan Well mystery (referred to below), and but a few months later in the same year. The captain had been visiting his promised wife, the pretty Anna Barrington, and he was on his homeward way when steps sounded behind him. That was merely the beginning of the torture. Letters, bearing no postmark, address or date, assuring him of spectral visits, appeared regularly on his writing table. Soon the spectre made itself visible, but seldom to the outer world, though old Barrington caught sight of it once or twice and gave chase unsuccessfully. From a portly, prosperous man the captain shrunk to an emaciated skeleton, and the sailor spirit accomplished its awful work.

Chief Justice Lansing, Mayor Varick and Recorder Harrison—a notable array of judicial talent—sat on the bench of the old City Court during

the trial of one Welles, just at the close of the past century, for the murder of Gulielma Elmore Sands, whose mysterious disappearance and the finding of whose body in the old Manhattan Well at the corner of Spring and Greene streets had been the talk of the town. The array of counsel was also notable, Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton being connected with the case. There was little real doubt but that Welles was guilty—in fact, the crime was traced to him some months later, after he had left the country, and it is known that Aaron Burr kept back much important evidence. Yet the verdict declared him innocent, and a dramatic scene then occurred.

Old Catharine Ring, Gulielma's cousin and her protector, who had sat passively in the court room, arose, and in a shrill and dreadful voice screamed: "I call upon the Almighty to curse you all, and He will do it!"

The curse was strangely fulfilled. Mayor Varick died suddenly soon afterward. Chief Justice Lansing started one afternoon to take the Albany boat, and was never heard of again. Alexander Hamilton was killed by Burr in the Elysian Fields, and Burr himself rounded out a wretched life, debt-ridden, friendless, poverty-stricken and miserable.

How Gulielma Sands was murdered, and why Welles, her lover, committed the crime, is a story that will never be told; but even in these days of modern New York her ghost haunts the neighborhood of Spring and Greene streets, and the little carpenter shop that marks the spot of the old well is avoided by the people who live near by. Young men and maidens who pass the spot late at night testify they can hear her scream as she vainly implores her lover for her life.

Flatbush has a spirit wanderer who haunts old Melrose Hall, once a manor house that resounded with gayety, now a simple country home of a retired parson, Dr. Drowne. This house, though for years one of the most important of the Flatbush manors, yet, oddly enough, was never the property of a Flatbushian. Nor did any of its many proprietors ever have the slightest interest in Flatbush town; for the most part they kept rigidly aloof. Colonel Axtell, Melrose Hall's builder, was a British officer, and the romance of the manor belongs to his day. He was the commander of a British troop, the Nassau Blues, which the Whigs of the region used to sneer at and openly dub "The Nasty Blues."

Melrose Hall, as built in 1749 (it has been despoiled and modernized since), was a fine old mansion. Its pillared front was distinctive and dignified, and it was further ennobled architecturally by two great wings. In the southernmost of



THE AUSTEN MANSION, STATEN ISLAND.

these was the ballroom, of goodly size, on the ground floor, and even so late as twenty years ago the gilded beams, the ornate decoration and the American eagle in colored bas-relief were quite visible and very well preserved.

In the loft above this ballroom was a solitary apartment with one window and no signs of a door. Colonel Axtell's family never knew that such a room existed. But a panel at one side of the huge ballroom fireplace opened, when touched in just the right spot, and disclosed a steep and narrow stairway, at the top of which was a trap-door leading into the secret chamber.

Here lived, day and night, an exquisitely beautiful, dark-eyed, dark-haired woman—Isabella. Tradition says that she was the sister of Colonel Axtell's wife, but this has not been proven. It is certain that no member of the family knew she was immured, or even that she was living.

Late at night, when the household was sleeping in their beds, Colonel Axtell would sit in the ballroom and muse; and then down the stairway and through the panel would come the beautiful woman, and Miranda, an old slave of the "quarters," who carried food to her secretly and attended her, would crouch into a dark corner and croon and croon and doze. Long before cockerow the panel would close and Isabella be imprisoned for another dreary day.

The Crown called on Colonel Axtell one spring-time, the tradition reads, to make an expedition

to the South, and being a loyal subject he started off. The month he expected to be absent ran into two or three, and it is even said six or a year. On his return a grand ball was given in Melrose Hall. The chivalry of Nassau Island, its bravest men and its fairest women, crowded the ballroom. Midnight was long past, and the gayety showed no sign of diminution. Suddenly a hush fell over the assembly. From a panel by the fireplace that opened noiselessly stole a queenly figure all in black, with a long black Spanish veil over her head. She passed like air through the crowd and came to where the colonel stood in a group of other officers. "Isabella!" he cried, quite off his guard, "Isabella!"

She smiled, turned and—vanished. The panel was tight shut. "Miranda! Miranda!" called the colonel, loudly. But no Miranda came, and a servant, stepping forward, told how Miranda had died of a fever weeks before, raving unintelligibly in her delirium about "the beautiful lady upstairs." Not to be dissuaded, the colonel rushed to the panel and up the secret stairway. In the room above, having kept its secret even in the agonies of starvation, lay the skeleton of Isabella.

Her spirit still lingers around Melrose Hall, though the house has lost much of its olden charm. Yet the legend lives, and the wraith of the dark-eyed beauty, Flatbush savants say, can be seen o' nights with a veil over her head.

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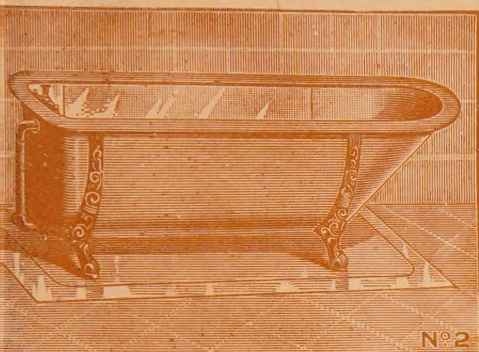
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*Proc. Nat. Sci. Assoc. S. 9.
Vol. IV, p. 83. - Sept. 14, 1895*

In Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly, vol. xl, No. 2, Aug., 1895, pp 235-240, is an article on "Haunted Houses," by Mr. Cromwell Childe, which includes legends and pictures of the Austen house at Clifton and the Britton house at Oakwood; also a brief reference to the Billopp house. The picture of the Britton house shows it as it was about five years ago. Recently a stone crusher was located close alongside and the stones which formed the walls were ground up into macadam for use on our new county roads. An account of this house, by Mr. Ira K. Morris, may be found in our Proceedings for May 13th, 1893. A.H.

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He has tried it in over eleven hundred cases, and never failed except in two cases (both thunder humor). He has now in his possession over two hundred certificates of its value, all within twenty miles of Boston. Send postal card for book.

A benefit is always experienced from the first bottle, and a perfect cure is warranted when the right quantity is taken.

When the lungs are affected it causes shooting pains, like needles passing through them; the same with the Liver or Bowels. This is caused by the ducts being stopped, and always disappears in a week after taking it. Read the label.

If the stomach is foul or bilious it will cause squeamish feelings at first.

No change of diet ever necessary. Eat the best you can get and enough of it. Dose, one tablespoonful in water at bedtime. Sold by all Druggists.

Used for over FIFTY YEARS by MILLIONS of MOTHERS for their CHILDREN WHILE TEETHING, with PERFECT SUCCESS. It SOOTHES the CHILD, SOFTENS the GUMS, ALLAYS all PAIN; CURES WIND COLIC, and is the best remedy for DIARRHOEA. Sold by druggists in every part of the world. Be sure and ask for "Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup," and take no other kind. Twenty-five cents a bottle.

